

Two Close Encounters with *Apatura iris* L.

By J. E. GREEN *

On 20th July 1977 I joined Gordon Haines and Norman Turner for a day in a South Wiltshire wood. Our particular aim was to observe the Purple Emperor (*Apatura iris* L.) and I hoped to get some photographs. Our first brief sighting was at tree top level at 10.20 a.m. following rain, and shortly afterwards Gordon spotted a fresh male on the ground in the ride. I got my first pictures from about 5 feet distance using a 135 mm lens, 7 mm extension tube and electronic flash. Then I slowly inched forward on hands and knees to about 2 feet. Through the viewfinder I saw that he was feeding on apparently bare earth, the end of the yellowish proboscis moving about frequently to different points. Photographs were taken with difficulty because he was restless, rarely staying still for more than 10 seconds, and walking quickly in random directions. I particularly noticed the sure footed ability to negotiate obstacles, and he often paused to probe under stones. The wings were normally closed, but when walking they tended to be partly opened as if to assist balance, and occasionally he paused to display. Sometimes when walking the proboscis was only slightly withdrawn, rather in the manner of an elephant's trunk. There was no reaction to the electronic flash.

He seemed to be wary of my friends who were standing, and flew off to settle about 8 feet up on a nearby oak. After several sorties to settle momentarily on the same ground, they decided to retreat, and he then settled. By approaching smoothly on all fours I was able to get within 8 inches of him. Using a 50 mm lens, 7 mm extension I photographed at f 22, to show great detail and that superb iridescent purple. Suddenly he took off and flew quickly out of sight. The whole encounter had lasted for 30 memorable minutes, and we saw no more Emperors that day.

A year later on July 21st, my wife Anne and I had breakfast at 6 a.m. at Malvern, and by 9 a.m. we were over 100 miles away walking in that same ride. Anne had never seen a P.E. and I stressed that a repeat of the 1977 encounter was quite remote. How wrong I was! An hour later a male P.E. suddenly appeared near a stack of recently sawn logs, and began feeding on chippings, presumably on resin. I took several photographs from 4 feet using the 135 mm lens system described above. Then he flew off, just before the sun clouded over, to settle about 12 feet up on a silver birch. Adding a 2X converter to the lens, I took a nice picture of the two antenna projecting outwards from a leaf. Ten minutes later the sun came out, and immediately he flew to the logs again.

This time though we saw he was feeding on a small piece of dry deer dung, and was motionless apart from the rhythmic movements of the proboscis. We crawled to within a few inches of him and took numerous photographs with the 50 mm lens

* 25 Knoll Lane, Poolbrook, Malvern, Worcs. WR14 3JU.

system. Twenty minutes later we decided to find out how tolerant he would be to disturbance. My wife carefully picked up the dung and closely examined "His Majesty" from various aspects. I got out my magnifying eyeglass and joined in the inspection. She then stroked his wings in the hope that he might open them and pose for another photograph but he wouldn't co-operate and just kept feeding with wings closed, even when gently pushed. We noted details such as the orange kneecaps, the purplish bands and orange tips of the antenna knobs and even spots on his eyes. The encounter ended with the passage of a cloud over the sun when suddenly he was away with that powerful flight, and as in 1977 that was the only sighting of the day.

My wife now discounts those descriptions in the literature of the elusiveness of the Purple Emperor. I wonder if anyone else has ever had such a fascinating first encounter with this species?

AN UNUSUAL PUPATION SITE. — Mr. S. N. A. Jacob's suggestion (*antea* 23) that the larvae of *Ectoedemia argenti-pedella* (Zeller) which pupated in a nest-box had been carried there by tits feeding their young is ingenious and convincing but for one apparently fatal flaw: the larvae of the single generation do not quit their mines full-fed until October or even early November, long after the nesting season is over. Mr. Jacobs is, of course, right about the rudimentary nature of the legs of nepticulid larvae, but I think he underestimates their ambulatory powers.— A. M. EMMET, Labrey Cottage, Victoria Gardens, Saffron Walden, Essex, CB11 3AF. 12.iv.1977.

THE SCARCE BORDERED STRAW: *HELICOVERPA ARMIGERA* HBN. IN 1978 and 1979. — Recent reports of *H. armigera* in this journal (vol. 90, no. 12) prompt me to record two larvae given to me on 2.xii.78 and 5.i.79 by my son who is in the fruit trade in Wellingborough. He found them feeding in Canary tomatoes which at this time of year are imported at the end of the British crop, from October to April. I recognised these from previous experience and had asked my son to watch out for them. The first larva was soon into its final skin and went under the peat provided, and produced a female on 26.i.79. The second pupa produced a moth on 12.iii.79. They were given water spray plus airing cupboard treatment. The larvae are said to be polyphagous as well as cannibalistic and in America where it is a pest, five generations have been recorded in one year. Records of *armigera* in the British Isles are usually for October. I feel it is significant that the light trap records coincide with the arrival of the tomatoes and that this species continues to be brought into this country in its immature stages at least into January, although the prospect of the adults being found must diminish rapidly with the advance of winter. — P. J. GENT, 3 Irthlingborough Road, Wellingborough, Northants.